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ABSTRACT

The question of whether athletics, religion, and education are compatible is examined from a liberal arts perspective with Christianity as a reference point. In the recent past an ideal of U.S. college life was that the college seeks wholeness of mind, spirit, and body. In the classroom, knowledge is sought, while on the playing field, health, courage, and teamwork are pursued. Religion gives faith, hope, and love. The contributions of Amos Alonzo Stagg, a former sports coach, and Frank Merriwell (a literary character), and Hobey Baker, a former top college athlete, are discussed. Coach Stagg emphasized the moral development of the individual, and felt that what made games special was a combination of morality, sport, and collegiality. Frank's and Hobey's heroics were fruits of character, which in turn religion and education helped to build. It is noted that sport can create community in the college and in small towns served by one high school. College athletics at Hillsdale College is also briefly discussed. It is mentioned that Hillsdale College holds the conviction that winning is honorable and that merit is the best reason for giving scholarships. (SW)

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IMPRIMIS

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Dilemmas of the Christian College Athlete

By John Willson

Editor's Preview: Consciously attempting to relate religion to other aspects of human life raises a multitude of interesting, usually difficult, and always controversial questions. Some relationships, however, are easier to acknowledge than others. Christianity and history, or Christianity and science, are, for example, subjects which have received a great deal of attention from scholars and others. But the connection between Christianity and organized sports is generally dismissed as superficial. Yes, it is true that both can be character-building. Both may, in some sense, provide "the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat." And both have their myths, rules, rituals, fans, and detractors.

Yet many people seem to feel instinctively that these similarities are profound rather than trivial; after all, religion departments, chapels, team sports, and playing fields have been prominent on college campuses for hundreds of years. It becomes important, therefore, to examine Christianity and sports from a liberal arts perspective, not to establish a hierarchy but, rather, an understood relationship between them.

Are athletics and religion addenda or integral to education? If the liberal arts are meant to develop the whole person, does this not imply that the mind, the spirit and the body are to be kept equally fit, and furthermore, that each contributes to individual character in a way that is not duplicable by or achieved in isolation from the other?

In this essay by Hillsdale College Professor John Willson delivered in the October 5-9, 1986, Center for Constructive Alternatives (CCA) seminar, "Who's on First? Liberal Arts, Christianity and Sports," is an issue which lies at the heart of Hillsdale College's own educational mission.

There's the story of the lady who went downstairs to do the wash, dressed only in a little nightgown. As she sorted the laundry she said, "Oh well, I might as well put this in too." When she bent over the washing machine to add more laundry, a drip from a water pipe splattered the back of her head, so she put on her son's football helmet to gain relief. Just then the meter-reader walked through the basement door. "Lady," he said, "I don't know who you're playing, but I sure hope your team wins."

Such is the metaphoric power of sports. That story would not be funny without the headgear, nor would it be as funny with a baseball cap, or if the water were on the floor and she puts on running shoes, (although it still would be funny). How would the story be told in, say, China? or Nigeria, or even Hungary? The only

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culture I can think of in which a similar symbol might evoke a similar response is the Spanish, and only if she put on a matador's cap.

To put this point another way: in the state of Oklahoma, it would be much more dangerous to a salesman's career to know almost nothing about Barry Switzer's current team than to know almost nothing about the products one is trying to sell. I am not certain that this is the case, but I have had salesmen friends tell me similar tales about Alabama football, North Carolina basketball, and even running at Oregon.

"Sport is absolutely central to contemporary American culture. Sport helps us identify our culture. . .the same is true of the Christian religion and of higher education."

Now, I use a funny story and an absurd example to make an essential point, and to make it quickly: Sport is absolutely central to contemporary American culture. Sport helps us identify our culture. And I hope I don't even have to bring forth an example, ridiculous or serious, for us to agree that the same is true of the Christian religion and of higher education.

Sports, religion, and education have come together most frequently on the college campus; the private college, at that, since the state has become determined to rid our public campuses of at least orthodox religions. Not very long ago, in fact, an ideal of American college life went something like this: On our campus we seek wholeness, the nurture of mind, spirit, and body. In the classroom we pursue knowledge and wisdom. Our religion gives us faith, hope, and love. And on the playing field we pursue health, courage, and teamwork. Not only were sports, religion and education not incompatible, they were necessary to each other. They added up to something approximating the bourgeois notion of the gentleman, the man of honor.

Amos Alonzo Stagg lived his long life according to that ideal. Although he is best known as the "Grand Old Man" of college football, having won more than 300 games in fifty-seven years as a head coach (and more in his last years, when he was technically the offensive coach for his son at Susquehanna University), Stagg actually started as a baseball pitcher (he had an offer of $4200 per year from the New York Nationals, which he turned down to pursue the Presbyterian ministry) and coached many sports, including the middle distance runners for the 1924 U.S. Olympic team. He was also the first full-time, paid "director of physical culture and athletics," a position he held at the University of Chicago for forty-one years.

Stagg came from a humble working family in West Orange, New Jersey. He learned the work ethic and strict personal morality from his family, joined the Presbyterian church at seventeen, and determined to enter its ministry. This meant college, which because of finances he had to postpone until his twenty-third year. He earned his way through Yale, influenced profoundly by its rigorous curriculum, its still healthy Reformed theology, and the sports values of Walter Camp. He played baseball as an undergraduate, started football only in 1888 as a graduate student, and in 1889 Walter Camp named him to his first All-American team, while Stagg was attending the Divinity School. When public speaking difficulties convinced him that he could never be an effective preacher, Stagg turned quite naturally to a career in the field that had so intimately accompanied his education. He went to the International YMCA College at Springfield, Massachusetts to study physical education (at the time perhaps the only school at which he could do so), and was lured to Chicago by his old religion teacher, William Rainey Harper, now president of the university that Rockefeller built.

College sports were just taking off, growing with the colleges and universities themselves in the era of rapid modernization after the War for the Union. Stagg tells in his autobiography a story that illustrates the connection. It seems that in 1896 Wisconsin was beating

About the Author

A professor of history and division chairman, John Willson has taught at Hillsdale College since 1975. A former syndicated columnist and professor at St. Louis University, Dr. Willson has published articles in a number of journals, including *Focus/Midwest, The Conservative Historian's Forum, Modern Age, Social Studies,* and the *University Bookman.* As a student, he played football, rugby, baseball, lacrosse, and basketball and at Hillsdale he remained active as kicking coach for football from 1975 to 1978 and as women's track and cross country coach from 1976 to 1983. Dr. Willson is also a lay reader and vestryman at St. Peter's Episcopal Church and a presidentially-appointed member of the Board of Foreign Scholarships. Recently *The Detroit Free Press* selected Dr. Willson as one of only four professors featured in an article on the best teachers in Michigan.

Chicago 12 to 0 at halftime. President Harper walked into the dressing room and said, "Boys, Mr. Rockefeller has just announced a gift of $3,000,000 to the university. He believes that the university is to be great. The way you played in the first half leads me to wonder whether we really have the spirit of greatness. . .I wish you would make up your minds to win this game and show that we do have it." Stagg called this "one of the most effective intermission appeals I ever heard," and Chicago won, 22 to 12.

Stagg was one of the first of the Ivy League "missionaries" to take sports, and especially football, into the nation's heartland. Before his arrival in Chicago, football was dominated by fewer eastern schools than

today dominate the game of lacrosse. But it developed quickly, taking the place of rowing, running, and baseball as the top intercollegiate sport by World War I. By the mid-twenties most schools had athletic scholarships, paid coaching staffs, recruiting budgets, and modern facilities. Hillsdale College's Stock Fieldhouse was built in 1926; that same year 110,000 saw the Army-Navy game in Chicago's Soldier Field.

Meanwhile a literary hero had emerged. His name was Frank Merriwell, and he stepped off the fictional train at Fardale Academy (in Street and Smith's *Tip Top Library)* on 18 April, 1896. He went on to Yale and into the world in the next twenty years, eventually sending his younger brother Dick to Fardale and Yale, the two of them becoming the subjects of hundreds of Merriwell titles, perhaps selling as many as 500 million copies (probably an exaggeration, the figure comes from Gilbert Patten, the "Burl L. Standish" who was the original author).

Although every episode was not an athletic episode, it is as an athlete that Frank is best remembered. One writer says, "While Frank was at both Fardale and Yale, his alma mater did not lose a single important athletic contest, as Frank starred in football, baseball, crew, cycling, boxing, and all events in track and field—the dashes, half-mile, mile, pole vault, broad jump, high jump, and hammer throw." He was master of the last-second comeback, the superhuman effort, stop-'em-at-the-goal line, reach-back-for-the-extra-ounce, win-one-for-the-Gipper heroic. The great sportswriter Red Smith assures us that the legendary Yale coach Tad Jones once said, in "the cathedral hush" before a Yale-Harvard game, "Gentleman, you are about to play football for Yale. Never again in your lives will you do anything so important." Frank Merriwell would have listened, completely earnest; a believer.

Before we sophisticates dismiss Frank as a rather pathetic late Victorian cultural artifact, or simply giggle

him into oblivion, let us note that he not only won games, he played fair. His virtue had no specifically Christian content that I remember, but morality was as much a part of him as skill and brains. Frank had a real-life contemporary at Princeton, by the name of Hobey Baker. Baker was a genuine Princeton hero, who died in a plane crash in France in 1918. "The whole atmosphere was electric when he was playing," remembers one sportswriter. "Everyone would stand up when he got the puck or caught a punt. Never wore a headguard in football and I remember that great shock of blond hair—Hobey standing there all alone. He was the only player you looked at, the only player you saw. . ." And this is what I am getting at about Frank Merriwell: Arthur Mizener writes:

> When Hobey Baker limped into his opponents' dressing room to shake hands and thank them for a wonderful game after he had been ruthlessly hammered all evening long, it was not because he was a fool or even because he was a man gritting his teeth and carrying out the sportsman's code. It was rather because that code was so deeply ingrained in him that he was incapable of treating an opponent according to his mere deserts; he always treated him according to his own honor. On the rare occasions when he was forced to admit he had been deliberately fouled, he was driven to tears.

He always treated him according to his own honor. Honor is rooted in culture, and both Yale and Princeton in those days still expressed Christian culture, although "the times they were a changin'." "With his incredible skill and grace" (Arthur Mizener again), "his perfect manners, his dedicated seriousness, Hobey Baker was the nearly faultless realization of the ideal of his age." If the ideal itself seems näive, I can only say it was still powerful in my youth. The Clair Bee novels introduced to me a new generation of Franks and Hobeys. It must be noted, however, that Clair Bee was a very successful basketball coach at Long Island University, who never recovered from the shock of discovering that some of his players were involved in the first round of basketball scandals, in the early fifties.

"My salvation is finally a matter between me and my God; but along the way that relation can be profoundly affected by the community in which I worship. Can a winner in life emerge from a community that teaches him to lose? I suppose so, but it is unlikely. By the same token, a community (and remember we are here talking about a college) that does not care about winning will itself become a loser."

We should also note that the "Stagg ideal" placed most of its emphasis on the moral development of the individual (somewhat less on the team and the school) and that it said relatively little of a specific nature about scholarship. Frank Merriwell's heroics were, finally, like Hobey's: you rarely noticed anyone else. That poses some problems for us who look for the Christian connection. And Frank (I just don't know about Hobie) was always a good student, but never a great student, and never, ever, ever a "grind." I doubt that the literary version of this cultural ideal could speak to us more about these difficulties. Frank's (and Hobey's) heroics were, after all, fruits of character, which in turn religion and education helped to build. It is probably dangerous to prescribe how pious or scholarly an athlete must be, but it is clear that he must be both.

"I take my football very seriously," Stagg wrote in 1927, "but I try to preserve a sense of proportion." By that time he had become a big winner and had developed a reputation for innovation, for finding ways by which "brains may defeat brawn and the underdog may topple the top dog." He was at least co-inventor of the T-formation, the forward pass, and was among the first to use the kick from placement. He won over two hundred and fifty games at Chicago, including five undefeated seasons, six Western Conference (Big Ten) championships, and one (1905) national title.

The "sense of proportion" comes in when one confronts his coaching mission: "To me, our profession is one of the noblest and perhaps the most far reaching in building up the manhood of our country" (you could still say "manhood" in 1927). The job was moral. Coaches were meant to be faculty members, ranked and paid accordingly, and to be regarded as teachers of sound values. He gave the Chicago "C" only under certain conditions:

> With the C goes a code. A man must be an amateur in spirit and in act, disdainful of subterfuge and dishonesty and ashamed to sell his athletic skill. He must be a gentleman and a sportsman, unwilling to win by cheating or unfair tactics. He must train hard and conscientiously and willingly make personal sacrifices to produce the best that is in him, then give it freely and loyally to the team and to the university.

That he could play well was only a minor consideration, last on the list. But Stagg knew that such men

would play well. "No great thing," he insisted, "is ever accomplished without a sustained background of deep feeling. This is the intangible, imponderable underlying, motive, the heart interest, of college athletics. The only analogy I can think of is love of country." Proportion, indeed: sport was a moral enterprise carried out in a collegiate setting.

The game itself was not moral. That is, Stagg was not tempted to put virtue in the object. Football played for money, for example, could destroy the mission of the college game. "The day boys play with one eye to the university and the other on professional futures, the sport will become a moral liability to the colleges." He added, "Once the college game becomes a nursery for professional gladiators, we shall have to plow up our football fields." It was the peculiar combination of morality, sport, and collegiality that made games so special. One would like to have heard Stagg's later thoughts, as in his last coaching years at Susquehanna professional football emerged as the mythic American game. We do know that in his late eighties, approached by a young fan for his autograph, he wrote, "Amos Alonzo Stagg, Ecc. 9 & 10." The ideal never left him, not for his more than one hundred and two years.

They are not incompatible. If Stagg's principles were ever true, they are true now; they were not simply products of the culture of late Victorian bourgeoisie. In fact, the principles seem quite natural to me. If you will indulge me for a moment: I grew up in a Christian home. My mother did everything she could to get me to church and teach me my prayers, my grandfather was an Episcopal priest. My family valued scholarship. Grandmother Willson was a serious writer, and my Aunt Bocca was Phi Beta Kappa at Syracuse in 1918, where she also held the university single-game basketball scoring record for many years (fifty-four points!). My father and his brother both went through the University of Pennsylvania on football scholarships, and became professional football players. My uncle quit after two seasons, went to law school, and is now a federal judge. Dad later finished first in his medical school class. I feel it in my bones: Stagg understood something very important about our culture and the nature of man.

The Christian jock still faces dilemmas. There's the story about Notre Dame playing Yeshiva in football. Notre Dame leads at halftime, 50-0, and the men of Yeshiva are beside themselves trying to figure out how to turn the tide. "I have it, yells the coach, "we will line up without a huddle, call out our signals in Yiddish, and that will confound the Fighting Irish." Yeshiva receives the second half kickoff, lines up, and the quarterback begins to call the signals in Yiddish. An enormous Notre Dame defensive tackle raises his head, smiles a toothless smile, and says, "Ha! No matter vat you do, nothing vill help."

Among other things we must ask is, to what lengths should we go to win? We probably shouldn't worry too much if Catholic universities hire Protestants and Jews to play and coach. We probably should worry if Memphis State fails to graduate a tenth of its basketball players during Dana Kirk's coaching years. Or if forty or so players on the current Miami football team have had trouble with the law since last spring. We must worry just as much if Swarthmore fires its football coach, after his team goes undefeated, for placing undue emphasis upon winning. Jim McMahon may have a proper place on the Bears, but I am certain Brigham Young is very happy that he is in Chicago. A group that calls itself the "Cambridge Persons," a softball team in Boston, has every right, I suppose, to abolish "positions," and "roles," and play co-ed, and sometimes let their dogs take turns at bat. They seem to be seeking what one writer calls "unity, in a Game of Games that joins the limited human body with the limitless possibilities of consciousness and being." Winning may not matter much when compared with "consciousness" and "being," but it matters if wholeness is to remain the object of the Christian college athlete.

"Modern egalitarian theory and the rules of the NCAA and other athletic ruling bodies have pushed virtually all small liberal arts colleges into Division III, that supposed bastion of amateurism, which limits colleges to "need-based" athletic scholarships, and which too often is a cover for hypocrisy or contempt for winning."

To illustrate this point let us call up the example of community. Sport can create community, particularly in small towns served by one high school and in the colleges or universities. Sport is often an important link between alumni, current faculty and students, and the students yet to come; Edmund Burke's dead, living, and yet unborn. Looked at another way, the metaphor can extend to the family, linking the brotherhood to once and future generations. Since individuals are defined by their associations in such small units (we do not exist apart; when associations break down, individuals

become beasts), then we are bound to look at the world, and to act in certain ways, because of our experiences in those groups.

My salvation is finally a matter between me and my God; but along the way that relation can be profoundly affected by the community in which I worship. Can a winner in life emerge from a community that teaches him to lose? I suppose so, but it is unlikely. By the same token, a community (and remember we are here talking about a college) that does not care about winning will itself become a loser.

The little worlds produced by such communities are actually the big worlds of our experience, to use one of G. K. Chesterton's marvelous inversions. Athletic teams are complex precisely because they are not abstract. Is the coach a tyrant, like Dad? Is our teammate a bore, like our older sister? We still must test ourselves every day in their presence. We rarely measure our love, forgiveness, courage, discipline, honesty, teamwork against abstractions like the United Nations or the Brotherhood of Man. But if we will not call forth what our coach asks, or if we refuse to lead or be led by our teammate, then we must suffer the consequences, because they are real. It makes both common and moral sense that communities are healthy when they put their faces resolutely together, determined to win.

It is not enough, of course, to rely on the metaphors of community. Families can become tribes, and regard all outsiders as enemies, and in some areas of the world make civilized society impossible (some African and Middle Eastern states, for example). Small communities of all kinds can turn ugly and oppressive. They can insist that we win at any cost and in any manner. Were we to stop here, it would take only someone waving an issue of *Sports Illustrated* that recounts the exploits of Brian Bosworth and the Oklahoma football team to negate everything I have said. Proverbs 6:18 reminds us that among the six things the Lord hates is ". . .feet that run swiftly to do evil."

When the Christian college athlete turns to the Bible to solve the dilemma of proportion, he must go away knowing that his sport cannot be elevated to anything like the quest of the spirit. Sport is sometimes a joyful thing in the Old Testament (Ps. 19:5 ". . .rejoicing like a strong man to run his race"), but usually it is no more than light and even frivolous entertainment. Samson was certainly a jock, and a judge of Israel for twenty years. But it at least contributed to his gruesome end that he could not distinguish between the things that were men's and the things that were the Lord's. Paul's oft-quoted running metaphors (Heb. 12:1-2 ". . . and run with resolution the race for which we are entered."), especially I Cor. 9:24-27, make it very clear that while it is fine to run, and to want to win, games are things of the body, and thus of a lower order than things of the spirit. This is particularly clear in I Tim. 4:8: "The training of the body does bring limited benefit, but the benefits of religion are without limit, since it holds promise not only for this life but for the life to come." "Jesus is my coach," says the T-shirts: I want to reply, "No: Jesus is your savior; Dick Lowry* is your coach."

Finally, on the matter of proportion, we turn to the classroom. My father used to tell me of men he knew in the National Football League who never attended a class in college. One lineman from Pittsburgh took an apartment near the stadium during football season, then went home to work in the steel mill in the off-season. This was the early 1930s, so the problem is not new. One suspects there were tensions between sports and scholarship even in Hobey Baker's day.

"Winning may not matter much when compared with 'consciousness' and 'being,' but it matters if wholeness is to remain the object of the Christian college athlete."

We must also remember that there are many schools today which strive for balance, proportion, and excellence. This is as true of Joe Paterno's Penn State football team as it is of the lacrosse team at my alma mater, Hobart College, which has won seven straight national championships. I also maintain that there are more college athletes in this nation who are decent students, and Christian, and working hard at their sports, than fall into any other category. Having said that, however, we must also acknowledge that it is rather easy to lose sight of the ideal under today's conditions. It is to that point, in relation to the Hillsdale College I have known in the last twelve years, that I will address a few final remarks.

Some perspective: Hillsdale has a long history of commitment to Christian beliefs and values. The Baptist connection, interrupted several decades ago, has been replaced in both our curriculum and our statement of mission by a broad, nonsectarian Christianity which is a guide rather than a litmus test to faculty and students. Hillsdale has also stayed true to the liberal arts for a century and a half, albeit with a few twists of our own now and then. And Hillsdale has played intercollegiate athletics for going on eleven decades.

There is everything in the history of the school, in other words, to suggest that we are quite comfortable giving this seminar. Furthermore, and I doubt I will get much argument on this point, Hillsdale is stronger academically, in its overt Christian commitment, and in its overall athletic program, than it was a dozen years ago.

So why should there be even a question of proportion at a school like Hillsdale? The answer lies, I think in our very uniqueness, in the very ways we are swimming against so many tides of higher education. Our dedication to traditional values and human freedom, for example, demands that we undertake an outward mission through IMPRIMIS and the Shavano Institute. At the same time we turn that outward mission to internal profit in the Center for Constructive Alternatives, which we too often forget is one of the most important innovations in this century in small liberal arts college education.

At the same time Hillsdale has evolved athletically against the mainstream. Modern egalitarian theory and the rules of the NCAA and other athletic ruling bodies have pushed virtually all small liberal arts colleges into Division III, that supposed bastion of amateurism, which limits colleges to "needs-based" athletic scholarships, and which too often is a cover for hypocrisy or contempt for winning. Hillsdale's conviction that winning is honorable and that merit is always the best reason for giving scholarships, have forced us into some expensive decisions, just as our refusal to accept government money has caused us added burdens in other areas.

But I have worked rather hard in all three of the areas under discussion here, and I know we are building soundly, and for the long haul. I have seen the Christian Studies Program emerge slowly, carefully, without perversion. I have watched a faculty pull itself forward, helped by a very creative program of merit scholarships for students. I have watched Jack McAvoy* build a balanced athletic program out of what was once an almost exclusive concern for football. Christianity, liberal arts, athletics: they are not incompatible at Hillsdale. If there is a place where the old ideals have a chance, it is here.

*Dick Lowry is the Hillsdale College football coach.
*Jack McAvoy is the Hillsdale College athletic director.

"WHO'S ON FIRST? LIBERAL ARTS, CHRISTIANITY AND SPORTS"

October 5-9, 1986

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